COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
April 27, 2006

QUIOTA CREEK (LOWER SANTA YNEZ RIVER) FISH PASSAGE

File No. 06-020
Project Manager: Janet Diehl

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to $371,800 to the Cachuma Conservation Release Board for removing a fish barrier and restoring habitat on Quiota Creek, a tributary to the lower Santa Ynez River.

LOCATION: Quiota Creek, south of the City of Santa Ynez, Santa Barbara County (Exhibit 1)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Resource Enhancement

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Project Location and Site Map

Exhibit 2: EIR/EIS (Lower Santa Ynez River Fish Management Plan)

Exhibit 3: Photos

Exhibit 4: Santa Ynez River fish enhancement projects (map)

Exhibit 5: Letter from Cachuma Conservation Release Board

Exhibit 6: Letters of Support

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31251-31270 of the Public Resources Code:

"The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of up to three hundred seventy-one thousand eight hundred dollars ($371,800) to the Cachuma Conservation Release Board (CCRB) for the implementation of habitat enhancement and fish passage improvement projects on Quiota Creek, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to disbursement of Conservancy funds, CCRB shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy a final work program, including a budget and schedule, the names of any contractors and subcontractors to be employed for these tasks, and evidence that all permits and all other funds necessary to complete the project have been obtained.

2. Conservancy funding shall be acknowledged by signage at the project site that shall be subject to the review and approval of the Executive Officer.
3. CCRB shall implement, or shall cause to be implemented, the mitigation measures related to the project site contained in the Lower Santa Ynez River Fish Management Plan and Cachuma Project Biological Opinion for Southern Steelhead Trout EIR/EIS dated February 2004 (Exhibit 2)."

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

"Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The project is consistent with Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31251-31270) regarding the enhancement of coastal resources.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
3. The project area has been identified in the certified Local Coastal Program of Santa Barbara County as requiring public action to resolve existing or potential resource protection problems.
4. The Conservancy has independently reviewed and considered the Environmental Impact Report/Environmental Impact Statement (Exhibit 2) and finds that the project as designed avoids, reduces or mitigates the possible significant environmental effects to a level of insignificance, and that there is no substantial evidence that the project, as mitigated, may have a significant adverse effect on the environment, as defined in 14 Cal. Code Regulations Section 15382.

PROJECT SUMMARY:

The Cachuma Conservation Release Board (CCRB) seeks funding to improve fish passage on Quiota Creek by replacing an Arizona crossing with a 70-foot bridge, and re-grading and restoring the stream channel to natural conditions. The proposed project would be the first step in improving access for endangered southern steelhead to one of the highest quality spawning and rearing habitats in the lower Santa Ynez River system. It would be the final disbursement of funds appropriated to the Conservancy six years ago specifically for salmonid improvements in the lower Santa Ynez River.

The river rises in the San Rafael Mountains in Ventura County, just east of the Santa Barbara County line, and flows westward about 90 miles to the Pacific Ocean. There are three water supply reservoirs on the river. The largest of these, Lake Cachuma, is impounded by Bradbury Dam, a 206-foot-high earth-fill structure about 50 miles from the ocean. Bradbury Dam effectively divides the watershed into an upper and a lower basin, with the lower basin comprising 483 square miles.

Before Bradbury Dam was built, the Santa Ynez River supported one of the largest runs of steelhead trout in southern California. Steelhead used the lower river mainly as a corridor to migrate to their spawning and rearing habitat in the upper watershed. That habitat became inaccessible when the dam was built. The height of the dam makes a fish ladder technically infeasible, although proposals for trap-and-transport have been advocated.

The current Santa Ynez River steelhead run is estimated at 100-200 fish – perhaps the largest remaining population of southern steelhead, which was federally listed as endangered in 1997. These fish depend on the tributaries downstream of the dam – such as Quiota Creek – for spawning and rearing habitat. The quality of the lower watershed habitat is limited, however, by factors such as low surface flows, high water temperatures, passage impediments, sedimentation and lack of streamside canopy.

Steelhead access to the upper reach of Quiota Creek is impeded at nine sites where Refugio Road crosses the creek at-grade (Exhibit 1, map). The most significant of these nine barriers – the "keystone barrier" – is Crossing #2, where perennial stream flow normally stops in the summer (Exhibit 3, photos). Good habitat for trout rearing begins from there on upstream, as the upper section has a number of deep pools with good riparian vegetation and instream cover. Upstream undercut banks provide excellent rearing habitat, where the substrate is predominantly larger-size gravel, cobbles and boulders. A resident trout population has been documented in the upper section of the creek.

Removal of all nine Quiota Creek passage impediments was recommended in the Lower Santa Ynez River Fish Management Plan published in October 2000. An EIR/EIS was prepared and certified on November 22, 2004 (see CEQA section of this report, below). The EIR/EIS evaluated the actions and projects identified in the Fish Management Plan and identified mitigation measures and alternatives to reduce adverse impacts. As part of the Fish Management Plan, CCRB is planning to remove or modify all nine barriers to fish passage by the year 2010. The CCRB seeks to start the process with Crossing #2, since it has been identified as the most significant barrier on the creek.

The proposed new bridge would pass the 50-year storm event with approximately one foot of freeboard. It would be strong enough to withstand the 100-year event, with water flowing overtop the bridge. These discharge values were evaluated and accepted by both the County of Santa Barbara and the California Department of Fish and Game. Initial hydrologic assessment and bridge design were completed by the County Department of Public Works in 2001. Hydrologic evaluation was done using rainfall and runoff data to model the runoff characteristics of the basin, taking into account climatic conditions, basin morphology and channel and floodplain roughness.

Construction of the bridge and re-grading of the creek would need to be done in the summer, to avoid the spawning season. While CCRB expects to complete final design and permitting by November of 2006, it would need to wait until June of 2007 to begin construction. Support has been obtained for the project from all three landowners (the County and the two private owners). The expected project completion date is November 2007.

Site Description: Quiota Creek is a main tributary of the lower Santa Ynez River located about 8.4 miles downstream of Bradbury Dam (Exhibit 1). Its watershed is approximately eight square miles, and includes both private lands and portions of the Los Padres National Forest. The creek runs for 4.6 river miles.

The lower two miles of the creek flows intermittently, and traverses pasture land with little riparian vegetation. The middle portion of the creek has a higher gradient and typically flows year-round. It contains well-developed riparian vegetation and high-quality aquatic habitat. The upper reach of the creek traverses the steep north-facing slopes of the Santa Ynez Mountains.

The Santa Ynez River Technical Advisory Committee (2000) documented rainbow trout/steelhead along the middle and upper reaches of Quiota Creek. Suitable habitat conditions are present, such as spawning substrate, stream gradient, instream cover, canopy cover and over-summering habitat.

Refugio Road is a County road that crosses the creek nine times along the middle reach. These at-grade crossings are constructed of concrete and include 8-1/2-inch diameter corrugated metal culverts to transport low flow under the road surface. Most of the crossings are in poor condition due to blocked culverts, downcutting below the summer crossing, bank undercutting, the formation of gullies related to roadway drainage, and general loss of structural integrity. The road is used for access to cattle pasture in the upper watershed and ranches on the ocean side of the Santa Ynez Mountains. The paved portion of the road ends at the ninth crossing, where the road turns to dirt and gravel to the top of the mountain. This portion of the road is often impassable in the winter due to erosion and wash-outs.

Project History: The survival of steelhead in the Santa Ynez River has been an issue of concern for decades. Government action was initiated in the early 1990s, when the State Water Resources Control Board, in reviewing the effects of Bradbury Dam, requested recommendations for operational changes and management.

In 1993, the Bureau of Reclamation (which operates Bradbury Dam) entered into a Memorandum of Understanding for the purpose of studying the lower Santa Ynez River watershed and developing a management plan for the river's fishery with these agencies: CCRB, Santa Barbara County Flood Control, Santa Barbara County Water Agency, City of Lompoc, Santa Ynez River Water Conservation District Improvement District #1, Santa Ynez River Water Conservation District, California Department of Fish and Game, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service,. The MOU established the Santa Ynez River Technical Advisory Committee, led by the Department of Fish and Game.

Over the next seven years, the committee developed the *Lower Santa Ynez River Fish Management Plan*. Mid-way through this process, in 1997, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) listed the southern steelhead as endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act. The Santa Ynez River was included in the subsequent designation of critical habitat for the southern steelhead.

In 1999, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation requested consultation with NMFS pursuant to Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act, regarding the effects of operation of Bradbury Dam on the southern steelhead. The Bureau proposed to implement operational changes and enhancement measures described in the *Fish Management Plan*. NMFS issued its Biological Opinion (BO) in September 2000. The BO concluded that, with the incorporation of the proposed changes and enhancement measures, operation and maintenance of the dam is not likely to jeopardize the endangered steelhead. The BO also

stated that the proposed operations and actions "will provide the small Santa Ynez River steelhead population with improved critical habitat conditions . . . [and are] likely to appreciably increase the likelihood of survival and recovery" of the steelhead.

Seeking funding to implement some of the projects mandated in the BO, CCRB secured a $750,000 appropriation in the Coastal Conservancy's FY 2000/01 budget for salmonid habitat enhancement. The Conservancy has since disbursed about half of those funds to CCRB, which has used them to complete lower watershed-wide pre-project analysis, design, environmental review, as well as a barrier-removal project on Salsipuedes Creek (another tributary to the Santa Ynez). These and other projects that CCRB has completed on the Lower Santa Ynez are depicted in Exhibit 4. CCRB is now ready to undertake the Quiota Creek project as a final expenditure of these designated funds.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	$371,800
CA Dept. of Fish and Game (planning grant)	50,000
Cachuma Conservation and Release Board	128,200
Total Project Cost	**$550,000**

The anticipated source of Conservancy funds for this project is the FY 00/01 appropriation of $750,000 to the Conservancy from the Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2000 (Proposition 12) for salmonid habitat improvement in the Santa Ynez River. These funds were reappropriated to the Conservancy in 2003. The project is consistent with Proposition 12 in that it will provide measurable improvement to and increases in available habitat for salmon populations using the Santa Ynez River.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project is consistent with Section 31251 of the Public Resources Code, which authorizes the Conservancy to award grants for the purpose of enhancement of coastal resources that, because of natural or human-induced events, have suffered loss of natural and scenic values. This project is the first step in carrying out measures to improve habitat in Quiota Creek for southern steelhead, an endangered species that is an important coastal resource. The project ultimately may lead to an increase in the southern steelhead's numbers and distribution.

The proposed project also is consistent with Section 31251.2, which authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to enhance a watershed resource that is partly outside the coastal zone, in order to enhance coastal resources within the coastal zone. The anadromous steelhead trout utilizes the Santa Ynez River and its tributaries that are both within and outside the coastal zone. Pursuant to this section, CCRB has requested Conservancy involvement in this project (Exhibit 5) and the Department of Fish and Game approves of the project proposed (Exhibit 6, support letter #3).

The project is consistent with Section 31252, in that protection of watersheds is one of the main objectives of Section 3.3.4 of the certified Local Coastal Program of the County of Santa Barbara. This project could result in improvements to the Santa Ynez River watershed, and is intended to protect and enhance critical habitat for the endangered southern steelhead.

The project is consistent with Section 31253, which states that the Conservancy may provide up to the total cost of any coastal resource enhancement project.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS & OBJECTIVES:

The proposed project will help to restore the Quiota Creek riparian habitat corridor, consistent with **Goal 5, Objective B**. Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective A**, the proposed project will implement a fish passage project identified in the watershed plan for the Lower Santa Ynez River.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** The project has the support of public agencies including the California Department of Fish and Game, the Santa Barbara County Public Works Department and the Cachuma Resource Conservation District. The project is also supported by elected officials and nonprofit organizations (Exhibit 6). Landowner support has been obtained for the project from the three parties involved – two private landowners and the County of Santa Barbara.
4. **Location:** Although the proposed project lies outside of the coastal zone, it is within the Santa Ynez River basin, which is a coastal stream, and provides critical habitat for the anadromous southern steelhead.
5. **Need:** While CCRB has obtained some funding from other sources, and plans to apply for more outside funds for the other 8 barrier-removal projects on Quiota Creek, Conservancy assistance is needed at this point to enable this first project to move forward.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The Lower Santa Ynez River watershed, including Quiota Creek, has been designated critical habitat for the federally endangered southern steelhead. This project would improve habitat for a species whose significance extends well beyond the immediate project area.

Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** The steelhead population in the Santa Ynez River has dwindled to a run of probably less than 200 fish. Nevertheless, this may be one of the largest remaining populations of southern steelhead. Without the Conservancy's support, improvements to steelhead habitat that may assist in recovery of the species are likely to be delayed or not be undertaken at all. One agency – the County – has dropped plans to undertake the project, due to funding constraints. CCRB needs Conservancy support in order to take on this additional responsibility.
8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** While the goal of the project is benefit the steelhead population, it will also resolve the issue of safety for drivers during periods when the road is flooded.
9. **Readiness:** CCRB has completed the planning, preliminary design work, and environmental compliance for this project, and is ready to move ahead immediately.
10. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** This project would implement one of the projects for which the Conservancy allocated planning funds in 2001. It would complete the expenditure of funds allocated five years ago to the Conservancy for Santa Ynez River steelhead protection.
11. **Cooperation:** This project has cooperation from the many federal, state and local agencies and organizations that worked for years to develop and implement the Lower Santa Ynez River Fish Management Plan.

CONSISTENCY WITH THE COASTAL ACT:

The proposed project is consistent with the planning and management policies of the Coastal Act (Division 20, Public Resources Code, Sections 30000 *et seq.*). Although all but approximately the last mile of the Santa Ynez River lies outside the coastal zone, river and land uses outside of the coastal zone have an effect on coastal zone resources. This is especially true of species such as the anadromous southern steelhead, an ocean-going species that relies on the entire river system to complete its life cycle.

Public Resources Code Section 30231 states, "The biological productivity and the quality of coastal waters, streams, wetlands, estuaries, and lakes . . . shall be maintained and, where feasible, restored. . . ." This project is intended to lead to habitat enhancement for the Santa Ynez River's population of southern steelhead.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The project is consistent with the certified Local Coastal Program (LCP) of Santa Barbara County. Section 3.9.2 of the LCP describes environmentally sensitive habitat areas as including those areas in which plant or animal life or their habitats are rare or especially valuable because of their special nature or role in an ecosystem. Section 3.9.2 specifically identifies as environmentally sensitive "rare and endangered species habitats" and "specialized wildlife habitats which are vital to species survival." Such habitats are to

be preserved and protected. Improvement of habitat for the endangered Southern steelhead is the goal of this project.

Section 3.3.4 of the LCP notes that watersheds "have potential for impacts on coastal streams, wetlands, [and] estuaries," and states that protection of watersheds is necessary to "insure continued biological productivity of coastal streams and wetlands." Thus, although the specific project area of this recommendation is not in the coastal zone, the project is consistent with LCP policies calling for protection of entire watersheds because of their hydrologic and biologic links to coastal zone resources.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The Cachuma Operation and Maintenance Board (COMB) and the Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) have prepared the Environmental Impact Statement/ Environmental Impact Report (EIS/EIR) attached to this report as Exhibit 2 to address various proposed management actions and projects that would improve habitat conditions for the endangered southern steelhead and other aquatic species on the Santa Ynez River below Bradbury Dam. The project recommended in this staff report – Quiota Creek fish passage improvement at Crossing #2 – is one of the many projects analyzed in this EIR/EIS.

The projects analyzed in the EIR/EIS were developed and/or identified in the following reports: (1) Lower Santa Ynez River Fish Management Plan (FMP) prepared by Reclamation and other agencies and parties involved in the Cachuma Project; and (2) Biological Opinion (BO) prepared by the NOAA Fisheries (formerly National Marine Fisheries Service) regarding the effect of the Cachuma Project operations on steelhead. Management actions in the FMP and BO are designed to improve habitat for the steelhead along the river downstream of Lake Cachuma through flow, habitat and passage improvements. The EIR/EIS evaluates impacts of the proposed actions and alternatives, and identifies mitigation measures to reduce adverse impacts incidental to the environmental benefits of the FMP/BO actions.

COMB is the lead agency under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and Reclamation is the lead agency under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). COMB is a joint powers agency comprised of CCRB (the proposed grantee for this project) and the Santa Ynez River Water Conservation District Improvement District #1. Partial funding for the preparation of the EIR/EIS came from the Conservancy, as a grant to CCRB authorized January 25, 2001.

A public review period for the Draft EIR/EIS was established from July 24, 2003 through September 22, 2003. COMB and Reclamation accepted written comments on the draft EIS/EIR during the public review period, and held a public meeting to receive comments on August 27, 2003 in Solvang. Comments, including those made by the Conservancy, were reviewed by COMB and Reclamation staff, and changes were made to the EIR/EIS accordingly (Exhibit 2, Volume II, Appendix F at 9). The Conservancy's concerns with respect to this project were addressed by the EIR.

On November 22, 2004, COMB certified the EIR/EIS and approved the many projects laid out in the Plan. The proposed Quiota Creek barrier removal project was identified and approved as part

of the overall project. COMB determined that the project will not have a significant effect on the environment once all proposed mitigation measures have been implemented. COMB filed a Notice of Determination with the State Clearinghouse on November 29, 2004.

The project under consideration by the Conservancy is the removal of at-grade crossing #2 on Quiota Creek. This is identified in the EIR/EIS as a "County project" because several years ago, the Santa Barbara County Public Works Department had planned to remove three of the at-grade crossings (including crossing #2) and build three bridges. The County adopted a Negative Declaration for its project in September 2003, but subsequently was unable to construct the bridges, due to funding constraints. The project was included in this EIR/EIS for the sake of completeness, and to evaluate potential cumulative impacts.

For the Quiota Creek project, the EIR/EIS found no Class I (significant and unmitigable) impacts. Three significant but mitigable (Class II) impacts were found:

1) **Riparian habitat at each crossing (consisting of scattered patches of perennial herbs and small shrubs such as mulefat, poison oak, blackberry, watercress, young willows) would be temporarily disturbed during construction.** This impact will be addressed by Mitigation Measure QT-2 : Temporarily disturbed areas shall be restored by grading to match natural contours, stabilizing creek banks with biotechnical methods that include riparian plants and revegetating with riparian herbs, shrubs, and trees that occur along the creek. . . . COMB . . . shall prepare and implement a revegetation plan that includes at least a 3-year maintenance period, and a 3-year plant survival performance standard of 85 percent. (Exhibit 2, page ES-9: 8-10)
2) **Construction of bridges on Quiota Creek and the modified at-grade crossings would result in the loss of several mature native riparian trees, removal of several small trees, and pruning of several others. These trees include coast live oak, alder, and willow trees**. This impact will be addressed by Mitigation Measure QT-3: All large riparian trees over 12 inches in diameter that are removed shall be replaced at an appropriate initial planting ratio to ensure a 2:1 long-term replacement ratio. Replacement trees shall be planted at or near the crossings. . . . COMB . . . shall prepare and implement tree replacement programs that include at least a 3-year maintenance period, and a 3-year plant survival performance standard of 85 percent (Exhibit 2, page ES-9; 8-13).
3) **For the Quiota Creek passage impediment project, construction activities in the creek bed and pouring concrete could result in discharge of sediments and concrete to the creek, which in turn could adversely affect aquatic life if the material is introduced to the creek after construction or during an accidental spill**. This impact will be addressed by Mitigation Measure QT-1: A stream diversion and dewatering plan shall be prepared for each crossing to ensure that stream flows will by-pass the work site. In addition, an erosion control and spill contingency plan shall be prepared for each crossing, specifying best management practices to prevent erosion and sedimentation during and after construction, and procedures for containing and cleaning up sills of concrete or other materials during construction (Exhibit 2, page ES-10).

The EIR/EIS also identified several potential project impacts that would have an adverse, but not significant (Class III) impact on the environment, none of which would require mitigation. These impacts are summarized on pages ES-12 to ES-14.

COMB has paid the required filing fee to the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) for its review of the EIR/EIS for CEQA compliance.

Staff recommends the Conservancy concur with the Final EIR/EIS prepared and adopted by COMB November 22, 2004 with respect to the Quiota Creek fish barrier removal project, which finds that the project, as designed, avoids, reduces or mitigates the possible significant environmental effects to a level of insignificance. Staff further recommends the Conservancy find that there is no substantial evidence that the project, as designed, has the potential for significant adverse effect on the environment.

All supporting documents and the final EIR/EIS are attached for review. Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Determination for the project.